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## *Marie Antoinette*, fashion queens and Hollywood stars

Sara Pesce

The contemporary cult of celebrity, strongly encouraged by the digital media, includes a wide range of strategies of self-promotion and multiplying virtual arenas that give potentially any individual an opportunity to reach public acclaim, set a trend, gather a high number of aficionados and become a celebrity. This is a context in which the feminine has become the target of ambivalent attitudes to women's 'degenerate pleasures' such as excessive preoccupation with clothing, cosmetics, luxury items and cosmetic surgery. Hollywood imagery and promotional strategies participate dynamically in this phenomenon, a fact that includes many forms of criticism made by show business insiders, including filmmakers. An interesting example is Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*. Its story and style create a metaphor of the Hollywood dream of stellar acclaim, embracing the contradictions inherent in this dream in the new millennium. The film also reveals Coppola's ambivalent vision, both nostalgic and critical, of the very notion of celebrity. As an heir to the New Hollywood's revolution of classic stardom, Coppola perpetuates and at the same time updates the previous generation's capacity to renovate the hierarchies of values attached to the cinematic icons, celebrating as non-conventional some kind of personalities that might, instead, appear as subdued to a political or cultural

1 establishment. She tells a story of female self-positioning, setting it at a historical  
2 moment of change in power relations, tastes and publicity: the fall of the *Ancien*  
3 *Régime*. This self-positioning is tentative and innovative at the same time, interpreted  
4 by a Kirsten Dunst who is transformed from the girl next door into a star.

5 I will therefore discuss *Marie Antoinette* as a phantasmagoria of the  
6 Hollywood female star, whether it be the actress (Dunst) or the filmmaker (Coppola).  
7 The film draws on the widespread vilification of the last queen of France as an  
8 emblem of the decadence of the Ancien Régime as well as her celebration as an icon  
9 of style and beauty. While King Louis XIV has been historically accused of excesses  
10 in terms of absolutist power and ego inflation, Marie Antoinette has become a  
11 paragon of vast unpopularity due to her secluded though much rumoured indulgences  
12 concerning her self-adornment and bodily pleasures. By depicting Marie Antoinette as  
13 both a disreputable and seductive figure in a colourful apotheosis of style, as well as  
14 highlighting the pressure of conforming to the conventions set by the Court, the film  
15 evokes the rules Hollywood Studio stars have long undergone, as well as the scandals  
16 affecting their reputations.

17 Coppola's parallel between Marie Antoinette and the contemporary  
18 Hollywood star questions the status of contemporary celebrities: is a celebrity  
19 imitable, is she privileged, is her upbringing all important? Coppola's *Marie*  
20 *Antoinette* prompts reflection on our mixed feelings about the fashionable elite and  
21 the cult of celebrity. I will therefore set the film against the background of the

1 contemporary fashion industry and celebrity culture. The notion of celebrity has been  
2 discussed intensely in the past twenty years. Entertainment industry insiders and  
3 scholars have scrutinized the subject from multiple perspectives. A number of  
4 scholars have reflected on the public addiction to celebrity: relating it to the rise of  
5 public society ([Rojek, 2001](#)), highlighting the role played by the mass media  
6 ([Cashmore, 2006](#)) or analysing fandom, the blurry notion of authenticity<sup>1</sup> and the  
7 economy of celebrity in the digital era ([Turner, 2013](#)). The ‘celebrisation’ of society  
8 has been interpreted as a mode of consumption. Fashion has been acknowledged as a  
9 crucial component of leisure and style in our celebrity-thirsty society ([Church Gibson,](#)  
10 [2012](#)). The film foregrounds splendour, style and leisure in a way that is very telling  
11 of the prestige of high fashion in contemporary society and has autobiographical  
12 overtones since Coppola has long been involved in the milieu of high fashion. In this  
13 sense, fashion substantiates the film’s elitist imagery, its implicit celebration of an  
14 Olympus of taste perpetuated by Hollywood filmmaking.

### 15 The problem of leisure

16 The prologue of *Marie Antoinette* contains a provocative comment on leisure  
17 spending as a status symbol. The young queen is openly enjoying her relaxation and  
18 privilege. This scene displays Dunst both as a fictional character – the last queen of  
19 France – and as a Hollywood star. Resting gently in an armchair, dressed in white  
20 satin and enveloped in the pastel colours of the turquoise and pink furnishings, she

1 wears a hairdo that is recurrent in the official eighteenth-century portraits of the  
2 queen, very high and decorated with showy white ostrich feathers. Her privileged  
3 upbringing comes to the fore: she is showing off her privileges, although with a touch  
4 of humour, revealed by her crafty smile. Coppola surrounds her with symbols of a  
5 luxurious lifestyle: decorated cakes, pastries of every kind, rose petals and adorable  
6 little shoes that a maid is fitting on her feet. In a flirty gesture, she winks at the  
7 audience. What we see is the disclosure of an enactment of the queen.

8         Yet the short duration of the scene, the intimate setting and the wink are also  
9 reminiscent of contemporary personal fashion blogs, both confidential and self-  
10 publicizing, where young women regularly post pictures or videos of themselves to  
11 document their outfits. In the extraordinary flourishing of this kind of blogging since  
12 the new millennium, self-portrait is the predominant mode of communication and the  
13 computer screen is used as a mirror ([Rocamora, 2013](#): 114). Dunst as Marie  
14 Antoinette also reminds us of the Manhattan society girls like Tinsley Mortimer,  
15 Genevieve Jones, Fabiola Beracasa and Zani Gugelmann who became media  
16 phenomena in the early 2000s, making their appearance in fashion shows, charity  
17 galas and boutique openings ([Agins, 2014](#): 68). These young women were charming  
18 in public. Fashion brands' publicists 'plied them with designer clothes and fine  
19 jewellery to get photographed in' (ibid.). They soon realized that they were far more  
20 than spectators of fashion and started to start fashion lines themselves. This prologue  
21 contains, therefore, many components of the contemporary culture of celebrity, where

1 the consumption of fashion plays a pivotal role. It synthesizes new modes of self-  
2 assertiveness allowed by myriad forms of the ‘democratisation of fashion’,<sup>[2]</sup> among  
3 which fashion blogging represents an emblem of new spaces of identity construction,  
4 ‘a panoptic gaze that reproduces women’s position as specular objects, but also a  
5 space of empowerment’ ([Rocamora, 2013](#): 114). Coppola articulates here a woman’s  
6 problematic control over her own public image. A set of alternative visions of  
7 femininity, a different mode of circulation of these modes are hinted at in her portrait  
8 of Marie Antoinette, wittingly sustained by the refined work of Milena Canonero, the  
9 film’s costume designer.

10 On the other hand, this scene is a critical commentary on the absence of rank  
11 or class that characterizes fame today, a phenomenon that includes a variety of forms  
12 of self-promotion and self-broadcast of ordinary people on and off the web or in TV  
13 reality shows – many of which display or discuss trendy styles and fashionable outfits  
14 ([Cashmore, 2006](#); Van Kreiken, 2012). The film’s overture is indeed an ironic  
15 celebration of aristocratic leisure as opposed to the commodification of leisure today –  
16 where ‘the meaning and value of leisure comes to be identified with the purchase,  
17 possession, and control of material goods’([Weiermair, 2004](#)and Mathies,: 112). The  
18 equation between conspicuous consumption and leisure is underlined here, reinforced  
19 by a soundtrack (‘Natural’s Not in It’, Gang of Four, 1979) that is an explicit  
20 commentary on ‘the problem of leisure’ and what to do with it. The pleasure afforded  
21 by new purchases can be considered at the same time enticing and disreputable. The

1 film might indeed echo the different criticisms, old and new, addressed to stars and  
2 celebrities that focus on the economic issues of surplus, waste and on the moral  
3 question of excess, vanity and self-centeredness.<sup>3</sup> Gossip and publicity, in the press,  
4 TV programming and the web (especially publications and programs at their outset,  
5 eager to grab the reader's attention) indulge in denigrating narrations about  
6 celebrities. Even the managers of celebrities are ambivalent towards denigrators, who  
7 can, in some instances, induce the public to adopt an indulgent attitude towards the  
8 celebrity's fragility ([Ricci, 2013](#): 37). In particular, the use of negative gossip to  
9 relaunch stars is very revealing if we consider *Marie Antoinette*: dwelling on the dark  
10 side of a personality is fundamental to the construction of the myth of a star, and  
11 Coppola capitalizes on Marie Antoinette's bad reputation and spending power to  
12 construct an unusual tale of fame.

### 13 Bodily concerns

14 Counterbalancing the denigration of Marie Antoinette, the film also highlights the  
15 liberating potential of bodily concerns. What comes to the foreground is the pleasure  
16 derived from sparkling, jubilant appearances, an escape from utilitarian concerns.  
17 These pleasures bring about a personal, if not political, empowerment.<sup>4</sup> To the  
18 viewers, this extreme lifestyle appears at the same time desirable and perilous,  
19 considering Marie Antoinette's well-known final punishment. The contradiction is  
20 seductive, especially because Marie Antoinette's glamour, emphasized by the film

1 especially in the intimate depicting of the queen's private spaces, evokes the paradox  
2 between the extraordinary and ordinary that the film star has embodied since the  
3 beginning of the Hollywood Star System, and which propagates in different directions  
4 in the contemporary mediascape. According to Richard Dyer ([1998](#): 49), the star lives  
5 a luxurious life but should not be transformed by it. She/he ought to remain a simple  
6 person so that the public can identify with her/him. This paradox was reprised in the  
7 many celebrity reality TV series that started appearing in the early 2000s, like *The*  
8 *Osbournes* (MTV, 2002–5) and *The Simple Life* (Fox and E!, 2003–7). These shows  
9 further develop the paradigm of the TV franchise *Big Brother*, whose viewers know  
10 that the reality contestants are people like them. They have been familiarized with  
11 them at the beginning of the program, before contestants become famous. They have  
12 witnessed step by step their transformation into celebrities during the show. The  
13 backstage has allowed viewers to keep their private lives under observation. It is thus  
14 easy to identify them as ordinary people. In *Newlyweds Nick and Jessica* (MTV,  
15 2003–5), for example, the protagonists Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson are ordinary  
16 people living an extraordinary life since they are both rock stars. They confront  
17 thousands of fans at concerts and are shown inside luxury environments, especially  
18 hotels. At the same time, they are also shown at home, as the show follows their  
19 marriage, displaying before our eyes Simpson's naive personality and playing on the  
20 popular stereotype of the dumb blonde.



1           In Coppola's film, too, the ambivalence between ordinariness and  
2   extraordinariness is displayed, since the ordinary core of Marie Antoinette is  
3   constantly preserved. Marie Antoinette's transformation happens before our very  
4   eyes. It is a passage marked by the language of the body and dress. From the naive  
5   Austrian girl who knows nobility in terms of caste but is inexpert regarding etiquette  
6   and style, Marie Antoinette undergoes an evolution imposed by the rules of  
7   Versailles, which flattens the separation between subjectivity and publicity. The film  
8   describes this evolution in successive steps: saying goodbye to her friends, leaving  
9   behind all objects and items of clothing of the homeland, learning the rituals of  
10   dressing before the nobles appointed to assist her, serve her and without doubt  
11   observe her. In this process, the positive or negative feedback of the courtiers is the  
12   mark of her conquests or failures. A number of elements pertaining to star narratives  
13   converge here: the blended personal and public identities, the appropriateness of the  
14   roles interpreted, the stars' style in relating to the public, their being exposed to the  
15   fans' sneaking into the most intimate spheres of their life.

16           Marie Antoinette therefore emerges as a model of behaviour where self-  
17   adornment plays a pivotal role and is used, although not openly or politically, against  
18   gender constraints.

19           *Marie Antoinette* belongs to the category of biographical films – lately  
20   financed by European production houses – depicting famous women. These biopics  
21   offer an alternative vision of feminine destiny as compared to the so-called new

1 woman's film, because they address the role of women in the public arena ([Radner,](#)  
2 [2017](#): 160). Yet, *Marie Antoinette* also draws on the 'new woman's film' by focusing  
3 on female self-gratification, inaugurated by the 1990s 'chick films' and 'smart-chick  
4 films' such as *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990), *Clueless* (Heckerling 1995), *Legally*  
5 *Blonde* (Platt, 2001) and *The Princess Diaries* (Marshall, 2001). It also contains the  
6 ironic vision of the woman's fate typical of this subgenre, 'a sense of uncertainty  
7 about the possibilities for fulfilment that contemporary society offers to women with  
8 its twentieth-century progenitors' ([Radner, 2017](#): 8). Coppola's portrait of the last  
9 queen of France is not merely that of an unfortunate victim of her class and time, as  
10 opposed to the novel from which it was adapted (Antonia Fraser's *Marie Antoinette:*  
11 *A Journey*, 2001). On the contrary, the film's emphasis on Marie Antoinette's fashion  
12 statements unveil the queen's spheres of agency, an *authorship* in designing her  
13 public role and her destiny.<sup>5</sup>

14 Fashion in Coppola's film is a vehicle of feminine celebration: through  
15 fashion, the victimized woman is seen to exercise a degree of agency over her fate and  
16 finally triumph ([Radner, 2017](#): 158).

### 17 Empowering fashion: An aristocratic phantasy

18 Marie Antoinette's use of clothing makes her prominent and publicizes joyously her  
19 agency, her influence as a young woman confronted with the conservative milieu of  
20 the royal court. The film was released in 2006, when in the world of high fashion

1 repeating old trends was the norm and successfully underwriting a designer's private  
2 fantasy had become very rare: a period when 'more and more designer clothing looks  
3 standard-issue, cut from the same linens and cottons, using the same sewing' ([Horyn,](#)  
4 [2009](#)). Considered in this perspective, Marie Antoinette's capacity to make her  
5 personality visible through clothing smacks of nostalgia for a time when the old  
6 nobility had the privilege of being dressed by *couturiers* of exquisite creativity. A  
7 nostalgia towards the daring inventiveness of *couture* – a culture which had  
8 definitively flagged by the 2000s ([Agins, 2014](#)). Marie Antoinette is, therefore, not  
9 merely a brand, as an insightful response to the film has already underlined.<sup>6</sup> She can  
10 rightfully be seen as the pinnacle of a lost world imbued with caste privilege.

11 *Marie Antoinette* was not an enormous success in the United States, but it was  
12 in Europe, where, at the start of the 2000s, knowledge about the big names of fashion  
13 was wider, and *couture* was more directly associated with aristocracy. Whether in  
14 France, Italy or England, Coppola–Canonero's updated and trendy imagery of the  
15 queen of France ([Diamond, 2011](#): 203–31) could be appreciated precisely because it  
16 added a special Hollywood touch to an idea of fashion design associated with  
17 personality and because it enriched a bulk of non-cinematic imagery and discourse  
18 relating to this historical figure. A characteristic of Marie Antoinette that historian  
19 Caroline Weber underlines was her special ability to raise her own visibility both  
20 figuratively and literally in the social eye. This can be deduced from the large amount  
21 of images, clandestine or overt, surrounding the queen and commenting on her

behaviour during the years of her reign. Her public persona was marked by extremes: extreme overdress and extreme underdress. She learned from an early age that fashion was a matter of political power ([Weber, 2007](#)).

#### Figure 7.1 Here

The film reprises this ability to raise the queen's visibility through extreme outfits. Let us consider, for example, the *pouf* ([Figure 7.1](#)). Marie Antoinette's use of extremely high hairdos began at a time when she was not very welcome in the French kingdom, due to her Austrian origins and the fact that she was not giving the kingdom an heir. At Versailles the king was the one who dazzled, commanding all attention. The queen provided heirs. Probably because she could not do her job as heir-giver, for a few years, Marie-Antoinette used fashion to uphold royal standards, gaining the allegiance of Parisian couturiers and stylists. The public opinion of the time nurtured an appetite for knowing what Marie Antoinette was wearing at any public appearance: balls, promenades, the coronation. Her trips to Paris showed her that outside Versailles there was a world where she could be adored, worshipped. She began to cultivate her image as a queen of fashion,<sup>7</sup> assisted by fashion ministers, as they were called. Marie Antoinette's trademark look was a plain pouf accessorized with ostrich feathers, which appears also in Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's portraits (such as *Marie Antoinette en grand habit de court*, 1778). Marie Antoinette's poufs could be accessorized with fresh vegetables (*le pouf à la jardinière*) or other objects to express her feelings or her awareness of specific political issues (*le pouf à la circonstance*).

1 The film emphasizes the queen's dedication to these elaborate hairdos, also showing  
2 her being assisted by an eccentric hairdresser. It also draws on one political event that  
3 inspired Marie Antoinette's decorative creativity – a battle during the American war  
4 of independence – portraying the partying queen with a headdress shaped as a fully  
5 rigged naval vessel. That specific hairdo reproduces the historical pouf worn by Marie  
6 Antoinette to make her public statement. By means of these strategies of self-  
7 decoration, Marie Antoinette could carve her own new territory: what a queen should  
8 look like and how she should express her states of mind. She used a code that was  
9 public, visible, strictly feminine. A code that also gave direct access to her intimate  
10 thoughts, a crucial element of contemporary celebrity culture. This search for a  
11 fulfilling feminine code of self-expression in the public arena is a crucial theme of  
12 Coppola's work, especially relating to the Hollywood milieu, of which the court of  
13 France can be seen as a metaphor. Versailles appears indeed as a historical arena  
14 reverberating present-day established territories of identity negotiation and power  
15 display.

## 16 Nostalgia for Hollywood royalty

17 While contributing to the development of a canon of women as historical figures,  
18 *Marie Antoinette* applauds the role of the 'established Hollywood' in creating this  
19 canon.

1           Inside Hollywood, Coppola occupies a position in between the mainstream  
2   and ‘Indiewood’, according to Geoff King (2009). She therefore introduces  
3   innovation, critical insight and auteurism, while at the same time embracing the  
4   industry’s commercial agenda. As a knowledgeable insider of Hollywood’s  
5   commercial dealings and a close witness to the commodification of its stars, Coppola  
6   endows her film with an awareness of the contradictions of the contemporary cult of  
7   celebrity. The film especially underlines Marie Antoinette’s ‘performance of the self’:  
8   a self-aware, ambiguous and unsatisfactory mode of female life and social relations. It  
9   does so using visual codes so accurate – as the choice of specific and recurrent colour  
10   nuances – and vigorous – creating a correspondence between costumes, decorations  
11   and the queen’s states of mind – that they surpass dialogue or action ([Lewis, 2019](#):  
12   190). The portrait of Marie Antoinette’s identity juxtaposes, on the one hand, self-  
13   denial and the cult of privacy, through the many indoor private scenes pervaded by a  
14   sense of self-protection, and, on the other, self-exposure as an inescapable social duty,  
15   in outdoor sequences, encounters with the courtesans and the rituals of everyday life.

16           Why is Marie Antoinette such a meaningful figure for Sofia Coppola and what  
17   makes her so topical today? For centuries, Marie Antoinette has been at the centre of a  
18   deprecatory discourse on the excesses of the Ancien Régime and has been blamed for  
19   the collapse of a political system. Marie Antoinette’s reputation echoes that of the  
20   Hollywood milieu, regularly attacked for its lavish lifestyle and its self-centredness.  
21   The film’s historical outlook makes reference not so much to the European aristocracy

1 as to another, very American, aristocracy, that of show business. It is not by chance  
2 that Coppola picked an emblematic period in the history of female visibility, when  
3 conflicting forces paraded on the battlefield of the presentation, decoration and  
4 commodification of the self. At the end of the eighteenth century, ‘the great era of  
5 ornateness (wigs, powder, brocade, cod-pieces, beauty spots) beg[an] to decline’ and  
6 came to be labelled as trivial. Historically, the decline of adornment in a person’s  
7 public reputation coincides with the end of the Ancien Régime, when the ornate and  
8 the plain started to be culturally and politically gendered: ‘ornateness being associated  
9 with the female ... and its value discounted, and plainness, correlated with the male,  
10 comes to signify dignity and power’ ([Spiegel, 2011](#): 184).

11 Marie Antoinette’s story as squanderer and fashion queen makes her the  
12 emblem of the contemporary dream of fame and of the price of celebrity. It  
13 reverberates and expands Hollywood fancy, its history of stardom, acclaim and  
14 decline. ‘Marie Antoinette’s fairy tale turned tragedy has spawned biographies,  
15 fictionalisations, operas, plays, ballets and memoirs.’ ([Covington, 2006](#))<sup>8</sup> Even her  
16 hairdresser and her executioner published ghostwritten recollections. And, like her  
17 marvellous wardrobe, the queen’s story became perfectly suitable for Hollywood’s  
18 sparkling style since the 1938, when the film *Marie Antoinette* was acclaimed as a  
19 triumph of costume design. Similarly, Coppola’s film, with Canonero’s colourful and  
20 coquettish emphasis on modernized decorations, emphasizes the queen’s  
21 extravagance while also celebrating Hollywood as ‘a dream factory’.

1           The circumstances of this particular queen’s notoriety, and the means she used  
2   to construct her public persona, can be appreciated in the post-feminist American  
3   context:

4

5           A globalised, neoliberal, female lifestyle economy in which gender is highly  
6   commodified has emerged as a dominant feature of Western women’s cultural life.  
7   ([Lewis, 2019](#): 192)

8

9           Some traits of Marie Antoinette’s behaviour – her blasting consumption  
10   habits, creative social adaptability and oscillation between extreme privacy and  
11   extreme publicity – fulfil a neoliberal ideal of femininity based on the ability to  
12   manage one’s own lifestyle, to self-train and develop ‘techniques of the self’  
13   supported by experts or coaches – often found watching TV shows ([Ouellette and](#)  
14   [Hay, 2008](#)) – and finally use the web for self-promotion. Marie Antoinette’s can be  
15   seen as the story of an influencer. The historical queen exploded Versailles’ dress  
16   codes by bending them to her creativity, she blasted the aristocratic pleasures and  
17   sophistications and created a personal environment at the Petit Trianon – an historical  
18   fact recently made attractive to the general public by the restoration of the queen’s  
19   palace inside Versailles. As I will discuss later, it is not incidental that this restoration



1 took place in the same years of the film's production. All the queen's lifestyle  
2 choices, which the film praises, echo the mode of 'adaptable femininity' ([Ouellette](#)  
3 [and Hay, 2008](#)) typical of the American post-feminist era, where contradictory  
4 dynamics occur between fantasies of escape and desires of extreme visibility.

5         This adaptable femininity can be seen especially in the cult of celebrity. Marie  
6 Antoinette's special ability to raise her visibility can be seen as an epitome of modern  
7 celebrity, a form of fame that has largely replaced the archaic concept of renown.  
8 'Renown ... was once assigned to men of high accomplishment in a handful of  
9 prominent and clearly defined roles. [It] brought honour to the office not the  
10 individual, and the public recognition was not so much of the man himself as of the  
11 significance of his actions for the society' ([Inglis, 2010](#): 4). It is historically a category  
12 applied to men, although illustrious female examples do exist. Take, for instance, the  
13 detailed record of the *Royal Progresses of Elizabeth I*. In her case, the royal  
14 ceremonials had the meaning of pledging the monarch to the people and vice versa  
15 (ibid.). Marie Antoinette constructed her own ceremonials around her attire and a set  
16 of rules concerning the spaces of the Court, which called attention only to herself, not  
17 to her royalty. The display of Marie Antoinette was certainly spectacular (as much as  
18 that of Elizabeth I), but the meaning the spectacle dramatized was not the same.  
19 'Elizabeth is renowned for being the monarch; Her fame is conferred by her people on  
20 behalf of God and England; the enacted theory of her rule partakes equally of her  
21 pious receptiveness and her subjects' supplication and approval' (ibid., 6)

1 Comparatively, Coppola does not portray a queen from a historical or political  
2 perspective. Rather, she expresses her personal fascination for the young queen's way  
3 of negotiating her position, using visibility and not accomplishment, sacrifice or  
4 heroism as a way of ordering the world – as Nick Couldry puts it – of being at the  
5 centre of things ([2000](#)). A new notion of hierarchy, separating those who have access  
6 to image-making and the rest ([Biressi, 2005 and Nun](#)), was born precisely with the  
7 collapse of the Ancien Régime.

## 8 **The sins of celebrity: Forgery and commodification**

9 Marie Antoinette's politics of public visibility epitomizes a historical period of  
10 cultural and economic shift in the circulation of fame. Marie Antoinette was  
11 consigned to a terrible reputation by pamphlets and by caricature images, by the  
12 spoofing of her clothes and hairdos and the endless repetition of her famous phrases,  
13 like 'Let them eat cake'. The circulation of her fame expanded therefore to non-  
14 official environments outside the court. In this respect, the fame of Marie Antoinette  
15 can be seen as successfully reverberating that of the contemporary Hollywood star,  
16 threatened by a flattening of the distinctions between stars, celebrities and  
17 personalities. Over the last three decades, the Hollywood star's monopoly of attention,  
18 traditionally sustained by a persistent industrial policy of marketing, promotion and  
19 publicity, has been threatened by alternative forms of celebrity (Church Gibson,  
20 2012), based on strategies of self-branding and blogging – fashion bloggers like

1 Chiara Ferragni, hybrid personalities like Kim Kardashian and multitudes of web  
2 personalities, so-called microcelebrities, among which are the media fans transformed  
3 into media professionals ([Marwick, 2015](#)), momentary appearances (e.g. the  
4 ‘celetoids’ analysed by Chris Rojek) allowed by multiplying platforms of visibility,  
5 especially on the web, that outstrip the official channels of communication. The effect  
6 is a levelling of differences and hierarchies, which the Hollywood elite, here  
7 represented by Coppola, perceives with alarm. This preoccupation is detectable in the  
8 crepuscular tone of Coppola’s film and her emphasis on the young queen’s aloofness,  
9 her detachment and lack of purpose. It is ‘a lament about the decline of status and  
10 value which attends modern celebrity’ ([Redmond and Holmes, 2007](#): 6), which can be  
11 read as a lament about the challenge to Hollywood’s hegemony ([Vincendeau, 2000](#);  
12 [Babington, 2001](#)). Film stardom faces competition from other kinds of celebrities in a  
13 production and distribution system where the big screen does not necessarily hold  
14 primacy and a vast range of media sites make the circulation of fame less unique  
15 ([Redmond and Holmes, 2007](#)).

16 Coppola’s film adumbrates the perils of contemporary celebrity culture.  
17 Indeed, it stains Marie Antoinette with the greatest sin of this culture: inauthenticity.  
18 At a diegetic level, the theme of counterfeit emerges when Kirsten Dunst is proposed  
19 as a posed fake in the film’s overture – a modern one, as the rock soundtrack  
20 underlines. However, forgery and commodification can be found even more clearly in  
21 the film’s paratext. The whole promotional campaign, the expansion of the film’s

1    imagery into the realm of fashion publicity (as in *Vogue* magazine's use of Dunst and  
2    the memory of her regal interpretation in the magazine's September issue of 2006)  
3    and the impact on merchandizing and tourism at Versailles have transformed Marie  
4    Antoinette into an icon of wearable luxury ([Horyn, 2009](#)) and have tested her capacity  
5    to become a brand.

6            Coppola's film participates, for example, in the myth surrounding Marie  
7    Antoinette's space of retirement, set within the grounds at the limits of the palace of  
8    Versailles: the Petit Trianon. In 1786, Marie Antoinette began building the Hameau  
9    de la Reine, an extravagant retreat near the Petit Trianon in Versailles where she  
10   could exclude the larger court nobility. It became a symbol of Marie Antoinette's  
11   extravagance and self-indulgence. The social life she organized there induced  
12   suspicion. Palace gossip spun outrageous tales about scandalous and perverse goings-  
13   on at the Trianon, giving anti-monarchist pamphleteers material for salacious  
14   underground cartoons. The queen's private residence at Versailles was restored  
15   between 2000 and 2008, when it reopened to the general public, generating renewed  
16   interest and reshaping her fame through a re-aestheticization of her image. This space  
17   has been transformed into an extraordinary target of fashion tourism, a very profitable  
18   strategy that has transformed the historical Marie Antoinette into a modern  
19   commodity. Each year millions of visitors flock to Versailles and Fontainebleau,  
20   where the queen maintained a second palace, to admire her exuberant tastes in  
21   furniture and décor ([Covington, 2006](#)). Marie Antoinette's use of the Petit Trianon to

1 escape the palace protocol is explicitly mentioned in the film. It is associated with a  
2 change in style that underlines Marie Antoinette's inventiveness and capacity to be a  
3 trendsetter. Her outfit in the little white dress, shown in the bucolic scenes of the film,  
4 was much more practical and simple than court dresses ([Figure 7.1](#)). It was a lot less  
5 expensive. Although it was meant for her endeavours to withdraw, it was widely  
6 copied by contemporaries, from aristocrats to prostitutes.<sup>9</sup> And Coppola's film  
7 displays it in a dreamy atmosphere. The scenes in the white dress offer an alternative  
8 view of the queen's intimacy, of her ordinariness. Her simple dress and unpowdered  
9 hair demonstrate, in fact, that social difference is no longer visible in someone's  
10 clothes. No sign of royalty is inscribed in Marie Antoinette's appearance, contrary to  
11 her historical paintings: no bourbon lilies, no crown, no fancy jewellery. Less official  
12 portraits, like *La reine en gaulle*, painted by Madame Vigée Le Brun in 1783, offer a  
13 glimpse of her passion for this outfit in white muslin, known as the *gaulle*, much  
14 plainer and more comfortable than the formal court gowns. This was a revolution in  
15 fashion that made prostitutes look like queens.

#### 16 [Figure 7.1 Here](#)

17 The Petit Trianon scenes are particularly telling of the importance of Dunst to  
18 the escapist meaning of the queen. The film indeed helped the actress rise to stardom  
19 after her debut success in *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 1999), and Dunst is  
20 instrumental to the depiction of the queen as a teenager. In the same years of  
21 Coppola's discovery of the actress, Dunst's fresh-faced interpretations were also

1     tinged with a rock aesthetic of intensity and romantic rebellion, as in *The Crow:*  
2     *Salvation* (Nalluri, 2000). Except in star vehicles like *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 2*  
3     (Raimi, 2002, 2004), Dunst's angelic persona and eroticism can be nostalgic of a  
4     familial order, like the lap-dancing angel of *Lucky Town* (Nicholas, 2000), or of a  
5     scandalous time in Hollywood's history (*The Cat's Meow*, Bogdanovitch, 2001), and  
6     are often substantiated by pop music themes (*Bring it On*, Reed, 2000). Coppola  
7     exploits her film persona as a candid provincial American girl to update Marie  
8     Antoinette's fascination, adding a hint of immaculate charm seasoned with American  
9     country-rock resonances.

## 10    Versailles and the unstable destiny of the ascribed celebrity

11    The contemporary celebrity is an industrial product, subjected to market forces, yet in  
12    the era of social media the celebrity can take shape as a 'bottom-up' phenomenon due  
13    to the multiplication of platforms of personal visibility. Personal appeal has  
14    undergone changes under the pressure of expanded modes of access to luxury  
15    products and lifestyles, where the fashion market is a driving force. Over the years,  
16    the blurring of lines involved in the *celebrification* of society has been widely  
17    acknowledged: film culture has become well aware of how social media have  
18    determined the idiom through which public life and subjectivity are constructed  
19    ([Marshall, 2001](#)). Because celebrity 'is constituted discursively, by the way in which  
20    the individual is represented' ([Redmond and Holmes, 2007](#): 12), fashion can be seen

1 as crucial to these discursive means. Fashion trends, brands and promotion have  
2 emerged as substantial driving forces in the imagery of screen celebrities and also in  
3 the process of their creation. Fashion is playing a crucial role in the interactive,  
4 authoritative, creative behaviour of their fans (Bruzzi and Church Gibson, 2013). The  
5 Hollywood industry (including cinema and television) participates dynamically in this  
6 phenomenon with its strategies of promotion of female stardom.

7         While participating in this ambivalent process of the celebrification of society,  
8 Hollywood has developed many forms of internal criticism. A number of Coppola's  
9 films, such as *Somewhere*, *Marie Antoinette* and *The Bling Ring*, are interesting  
10 examples of this. While creating narratives on – or metaphors of – the Hollywood  
11 dream of stellar acclaim, these films offer a meaningful example of the ambiguities of  
12 the empowerment of the star.

13         *Marie Antoinette* can be seen as a phantasmagoria of the Hollywood female  
14 star precisely because Versailles activates contemporary fantasies and consumption  
15 habits related to sophistication. The historical legacy left by Marie Antoinette is  
16 certainly related to Versailles' opulence and capacity to shape a newcomer into a  
17 public personality in every detail of attire and behaviour. Coppola's film establishes a  
18 convincing link between monarchy and cinematic stardom, made explicit in the  
19 scenes of the regulated codes of dressing, and dinners in front of the courtesans. As  
20 historians have underlined, in Versailles, Marie Antoinette learned to look the part of  
21 the royal every minute of every day. To a contemporary eye, that place is pungently

1    reminiscent of Hollywood's combination of exclusivity and ostentation. The rituals  
2    and conventions set by the Court are reminiscent of Hollywood Studios' impositions  
3    on the star's duties, body, behaviour and identity. This has long been the price of fame  
4    that the star is supposed to pay, though not often willingly.

5           The behavioural protocols, the marketing and publicity of the Hollywood  
6    industry create a monopoly of attention around the star, with exorbitant rewards.  
7    Royalty, Rojek indicates, is one of the few modes of celebrity that is determined by  
8    blood. It is 'ascribed celebrity' ([2001](#): 17). Contrary to Rojek's argument that the  
9    royal celebrity is safe from many of the vicissitudes that the celebrities from the  
10   entertainment undergo (a stability of status, a guarantee of privilege), Coppola's  
11   'allegory' extends the equation between royalty and stardom in their unstable destiny:  
12   Marie Antoinette is perceived today as a precarious figure as much as the Hollywood  
13   starlet.

14           Coppola's Marie Antoinette, with her adolescent self-absorption and her  
15   totalizing style-oriented vision of life, serves a need for narratives about fame capable  
16   of negotiating royal celebrity with two centuries of democratic culture. This character  
17   resonates with 'the same kind of involvement with publicity and public relations that  
18   we might associate with party politics or the movie industry'; not unlike  
19   contemporary royals, she is an aristocrat offered for public consumption.<sup>[10]</sup>

20   **Conclusion: Coppola queen, Coppola Star**



1 Marie Antoinette is a portrait conceived by a filmmaker who sees herself as an heir of  
2 ‘the magnificent Hollywood’. The model of celebrity that Hollywood applauds,  
3 fearing the attacks of contemporary competitors like television and the web, is  
4 nurtured by fantasies of regality inspired by the absolute monarchies, despite their  
5 elitism and closed-mindedness. These fantasies of sumptuous ostentation and absolute  
6 power inspired the Hollywood pioneers at the time they were building the industry. In  
7 these ‘Hollywoodian monarchies’, so to speak, those at the forefront in terms of  
8 representation, of splendour, of celestial admiration, are the stars, who are, according  
9 to Danae Clark (1995), ‘a privileged class within the division of actors’ labour’  
10 ([MacDonald, 2013](#): 5). Therefore, stardom in Hollywood is a category of labour and  
11 class, a social and economic category. Telling a story about the highest of classes –  
12 royalty – and the ‘labour’ performed by that class (ruling over the norms of behaviour  
13 and etiquette, influencing courtesans and people, setting new fashions), ennobles and  
14 at the same time mourns Hollywood stardom.

15 In this sense, Coppola’s film exposes the false democracy of contemporary  
16 celebrity culture, where only the elite can set a trend or make powerful statements.  
17 Notwithstanding the guillotine – which is absent from the narrative – the film  
18 celebrates Marie Antoinette’s success while revealing its complexities; a success that  
19 strongly confirms the perception of privilege – the ‘Let them eat cake’ transferred to  
20 Haute couture ([Browne, 2006](#)). Ultimately, it conveys the uniqueness of the  
21 Hollywood star, traditionally used as a marker of distinction (The Star-as-brand

1 according to [Paul MacDonald \(2013: 41–64\)](#)), and whose high quality is proposed as  
2 essential and not fabricated. This notion of caste inherent in Hollywood stardom  
3 reverberates also in the very real stigma attached to endorsements within the  
4 Hollywood milieu, testifying to an idea of stardom as something ‘which exists outside  
5 of commerce, a social contract without an economic contract’ ([Turner, 2013: 106](#)).

6 Finally, through Marie Antoinette’s stylistic emancipation and pleasures,  
7 Coppola celebrates herself as a filmmaker unafraid to take risks with style and subject  
8 matter ([Cook, 2007: 480–1](#)). She celebrates her high profile, her glamour. Coppola  
9 belongs to the class of Americans that reconciles Bohemian sensibility with that of the  
10 bourgeois ([Lewis, 2019: 194](#)), which has the cultural function of maintaining the  
11 status quo in the face of the democratization of celebrity. Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*  
12 prompts a reflection on our mixed feelings about democracy and high castes, where  
13 ‘democracy perpetually fails to deliver what it promises, and arguably, this failure is  
14 most cruelly exposed in the limitations of its elected leaders’ ([Rojek, 2001: 181](#)). The  
15 conflict between the ideally universal accessibility to fame and the menace of  
16 celebrity degradation or dissipation is enacted by a story of seductive femininity in  
17 which not only youth and invention but also means and bloodline allow the woman’s  
18 survival in a demanding environment. It perpetuates the dream-factory-ideal  
19 according to which Hollywood is still the place where a woman’s makeovers,  
20 negotiations and constructions of identity take place, albeit painfully. It includes in the  
21 celebrity portrait the current neoliberal climate which encourages women to consume

1 ever more fashionable goods and leads them to excessive self-exposure, followed at  
2 times by shame and solitude, while avoiding any depiction of the woman's cruel  
3 destiny – the well-known death of Marie Antoinette.

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- 9 [Figure 7.1: The pouf, in *Marie Antoinette* directed by Sofia Coppola © Columbia  
10 Pictures 2006.]
- 11 [Figure 7.2: Bucolic scene, in *Marie Antoinette* directed by Sofia Coppola ©  
12 Columbia Pictures 2006.]

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¶ The two edited volumes of Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* ([2007](#)) and *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (2010), gather many of these critical perspectives on celebrity culture in the new millennium.

¶ Concerning the new democratization of fashion in the twenty-first century, due to new industrial politics, the impact of the media and the globalization, see Thomas (2007), Warner (2014), English (2013) and Agins (2000).

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<sup>3</sup> As Chris Rojek (2012: 5) underlines, this kind of criticism is more often addressed to television wannabe stars. It can also manifest in ‘star paranoia’, which derives from sentiments of resentment towards celebrities for getting ahead in some way that is commonly deemed to be unreasonable. A specific discourse on excess is at the core of the success of some televisual celebrities, epitomized in Paris Hilton. Discourse and enactments concerning fashion consumption have become the core of televisual programs, from reality shows to docu-fiction. Discourse on the star’s body can offer the occasion to attack the star and her/his decline, as in the case of Nicole Kidman, who in 2010 became one of the paragons of negative comparison regarding facelifts.

<sup>4</sup> See Diana Diamond’s comments on how *Marie Antoinette* epitomizes the ‘third wave of feminism’ (2011: 208).

<sup>5</sup> In this respect, see Thomas (1997 and 2004). See also the film *Farewell, My Queen* (Jacquot, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Fashion journalist Alix Browne (2006) maintains that Marie Antoinette is officially a brand.

<sup>7</sup> The film does not put much emphasis on the pouf, sticking mostly to official portraits of the queen, although a coquettish appearance is always around Marie Antoinette. Surprisingly, poufs are to be found more easily on other aristocrats, at the theatre and during celebrations.



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<sup>9</sup> As Weber underlines, an impressive number of women started to imitate Marie Antoinette. This was the birth of modern fashion magazines. Evidence comes from contemporary prints of her attire in the company of women similarly dressed. Official portraits show her the way she ought to appear in official ceremonies (like the coronation of the king), whereas prints showed what she actually looked like: girly, thrilling, coquettish.

<sup>10</sup> Graeme Turner (2013: 106) analyses the notion of ‘royal celebrity’ in contemporary society.